

2020

The coronation

Cameron Gray
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Gray, Cameron, "The coronation" (2020). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 18132.
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/18132>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

The coronation

by

Cameron Gray

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Mitchell Squire, Major Professor
Peter Goché
Ingrid Lilligren
Olivia Valentine

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2020

Copyright © Cameron Gray, 2020. All rights reserved.

DEDICATION

To Lydia, thank you for being my light through the darkness...

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
THE CORONATION	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY	34

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1. Diggin' (still from digital video, 5min. 02sec.)	29
Figure 2. Untitled (still from digital video, 6min. 43sec.)	30
Figure 3. Too Heavy (still from digital video, 44 sec.).....	31
Figure 4. Harvesting (still from digital video, 13 min. 31sec.)	32
Figure 4. My Body is my Body as my Body is Wood (still from video, 01 min. 16 sec.)..	33

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give a special thanks to my committee. To my major professor, Mitchell Squire, you have not only guided me through this entire process with understanding and patience, but also held me to the flame when needed. Thank you for the long talks as well as being that ear for my frustrations while continually showing support. To Peter Goché, Ingrid Lilligren and Olivia Valentine, thank you for being patient with me during this very crazy and sometimes depressing process. None of us could have ever expected a pandemic would hit us during this time; nevertheless, you kept calm and were very flexible. Thank you all so much!

I would like to also thank my parents for the long phone calls, always checking up on me at the right time. You guys have always been there for me even when I made decisions that went against your own gut. I appreciate you so much for allowing me to live my life while trusting me to find my own way.

ABSTRACT

The Coronation is a case study exhibition about a Black man's journey into understanding himself and his identity. The manner in which the thesis is written provides the author's commentary on personal experiences and a window into his psyche and Black experience. The text lifts the veil on the complexities of the author's struggles with identity within America. The Coronation is a companion piece to the exhibition. The Coronation and the art exhibition are both extremities of the author's body. By using dialect common to the everyday experience it describes, the text provides the reader an otherwise uncommon and accessible window to the author's psyche and specific Black experience and, relatedly, to his work. This is perhaps its greatest distinction from a conventional biography.

This work is heavily based on research of a Black man trying to figure out his identity within the scope of the world while attempting to carve his own lane. The author did not include explanations behind each individual work and what inspired them because it [choice] was his thesis. The figures are provided at the end of this document to provide a window into some of the creative work the author generated throughout the course of writing The Coronation. The thesis provides an illustration of a man's journey to search for a definition of Blackness, ultimately finding there isn't one. People who read this text should have the opportunity to fully access the story regardless of their educational level. If the story and the mistakes made by the author can deliver somebody from their own personal hell, then the goal was accomplished. Thus, every successful accomplishment is deserving of a coronation.

THE CORONATION

This thesis addresses the enigma of how I became this Black man who is strong in my convictions about art and other aspects of my being. It started with a person pushing a small snowball within my own psyche, which inherently grew to be what I am today—a confident BLACK MAN, unafraid to be completely honest about where I am from and where I am going. In order to tell this story, I have to start from the beginning, the moment that I had to physically come to terms with the fact that I am a Black Man in America. The dreams that I had for myself did not align with those who had their own perceptions of who I am as a person.

It all began when I was born on... *I don't think I'm going that far back... although it would be illuminating if that is where I began this journey because, in theory, that was the beginning of everything.* Rather, I'll simply start where I first realized my own Blackness. I can't remember a time in which my folks mentioned me being different than the other kids I grew up with. My parents always made sure that I felt confident in the settings involving kids my own age. They always instilled within me that I was a Black King and that I was no different than anybody of my peer group. They always kept tabs on me as an individual. They did whatever they could to make sure my grades were on par or better than all of my classmates. Nevertheless, at the same time, they could not understand the experience that I was facing outside of our home, the experience of living one's adolescence and formative adult years in complete turmoil due to loss of self. How do I exist without them? How am I even equal to the idea of the person they see me as being? I still don't have the answer, yet the question of who I am and what it means to be me in this world is the beginning of my journey.

In retrospection, I can't help but think about the time I first realized my own race. It was clear as day. It was on a Friday. *It had to be because it was a Wet Day. I don't honestly see the*

daycare staff cleaning up on a Wet Day! Where they let the kids run free and wild in water! I'd be damned if I had to stay late on a Monday to clean that up. Yet I digress. At our preschool we had a blue awning that we would compete to see who could climb the highest on the pole. On this particular day, the area was completely flooded. The concrete ground resembled that of a murky lake. We would trade the tricycles that were on the playground and run them through the lake while sitting at splash distance in anticipation to see who could make the biggest splash. The arching water resembled that of a putti fountain spewing water out of its mouth.

As our time was winding down, we knew we had to dry off soon. A classmate came up with the great idea of shaking his hair to splash on all of us. As my peers were in deep laughter from splashing water on each other, I was in complete awe. The whole moment seemed to transpire in slow motion. Their heads shook furiously, and they were smiling from ear to ear. All I could do was pay attention to how their hair seemed to jump off their foreheads and form a saucer shape. The individual strands banded together only to be constantly separated by the motion of their head. A brief rest on their foreheads only to be thrown off again.

After my classmates had reached a combination of tiredness and dizziness, the finale came. As performers would do at the end of a play or concert, they took their final bow. The once loose and untamable hairs fell straight back as if rehearsed. They then rubbed their hands through their hair like a plow on an Iowan cornfield.

I was infatuated. When it was my turn, I repeated their same motions. My hair stayed in place. Not moving an inch. *My dad had always cut my hair low, so it was impossible for it to move like theirs did. In this particular situation, the logic was not up for consideration.* I had no idea why it didn't work. I was devastated and embarrassed. I could see the baffled look on their faces, I began to ponder, *"Why didn't my hair move like theirs? We were the same age, and had*

the same interests? What was I missing?" Although my hair didn't move at that time, I was determined to make it work like theirs. After each shower or bath, I would dunk my head or cup water with my hands, baptizing my beautifully shaven scalp and shaking it profusely. I prayed hard for the moment when my hair would move like theirs. Each night this would be my routine. I was always unsuccessful. I became obsessed. As I watched tv shows or movies, I was constantly reminded of my shortcomings. It almost felt like the screen was taunting me. Like clockwork, the love interest would see the main protagonist for the first time, and time would stop. *To this day, I have not understood my interest in those sequences. One can tell from the current frame rate how attractive they were.*

He would shake his golden locks from side to side, entrancing me like a snake charmer to his cobra. The sun would shine so bright on his hair that it was almost blinding. When complete, it felt like he would stare directly at me and say, "My hair is beautiful! You can never do this!" And he was right, I couldn't.

This was the first moment I realized that felt inadequate. I thought, even until this time in my life, I had never felt physically adequate to what I was supposed to be as a human. I had always felt that everyone had this idea of confidence within themselves—that I never had. To distract myself from my insecurities, I would use my imagination or create a world that I had full control over, freeing myself from the pain of being myself. Television and movies were an escape for me as a child. They were my refuge. For thirty minutes to an hour, I could stop being me. I could invest my mental space into the psyche of the characters. I was more intrigued if Batman would see the end of the episode than dealing with the fact that I was in a remedial class.

During my adolescence, there were not many tv shows that truly depicted Black life on TV, especially ones that kids experience. I can't express how much it meant to me to see the

show, *My Brother and Me* on Nickelodeon. It was a show that was dedicated to the Black experience as a middle-class kid in America. The actors talked like me and they looked like me. Even the actors' parents had pledged the same Black fraternity and sorority as my parents did. As far as I was concerned, they were my brother and me. I felt so empowered when I was watching that show because it proved that I could be that person and have those experiences. I had value as an individual to be worthy enough to be on screen. Prior to that show, I would often watch old reruns of cartoons from the eighties such as *The Thunder Cats* and *Johnny Quest*. I could apply the moniker of the "black character" on the show based on his skin tone or what he was wearing. That was enough for me to understand that these shows are relatable.

There were a couple of formative movie experiences that I had when I was that age, but none affected me as much as *Toy Story*. It was hooked! Before this movie, I had watched many animated movies and cartoons. I even considered myself to be an expert on these films, in the sense that I knew how they were created and filmed. One could see the lines of the artist's hand that had drafted the scenes in these films, or the static [still] which painted world they inhabited.

Understanding the logistics behind an animated film provided me with an expectation of what this movie-going experience was going to be like. I could usually see the lines and still be baffled by the background. However, *Toy Story* was nothing that I could have ever imagined. I was astounded! There were no lines, and the toys had round shapes and looked like the toys that I had at home. I thought, "How is this possible? How did they get toys to respond this way on screen?"

That movie stayed in my mind for days. I couldn't imagine a way to figure out how the action was possible. I tried to recreate the same experience through my drawings at home but found it was impossible. It was at that moment that I knew that I wanted to replicate the same

experience for a select group of people. I wanted to bring my story and others to the big screen and dazzle individuals in awe of my creation. I knew that I wanted to do this as a creator because I wanted to make something that impacted people and their lives. The work would be like blood on Ophelia's hands that she, for the life of her, could not remove.

This experience was a beginning in which I finally understood the power that art can bring to the viewer. Although I was four and wasn't yet able to conceptualize what I was feeling, I knew that being a creator was what I wanted to be in my life. *Toy Story* was truly impactful and inspired me as a child, and I yearned to pay it forward to someone else.

I discovered in first or second grade that I learned best by mimicry. In order for me to understand a specific problem on a worksheet, I needed someone to demonstrate it to me, and then I would be able to complete the paper. When I was at school, it was very hard for me to focus because of the constant noise in the classroom. Some kids were loud and rambunctious as others worked. Depending on the task, it would generally take me a longer time to complete the worksheet than some of my classmates. Many times in those environments, I would try to rush through the task so that I could play, rather than take my time and be patient with myself to find the correct answer. Too often, the result was that I was slower at fully grasping what I was learning. I often went back and forth to the teacher to ask, "Is this Right?" "What about this?" I would get overwhelmed because I perceived I was missing out on something. I could also see how much fun that the other kids were having, and I wanted to be a part of that.

During a PTA meeting, my teacher had suggested to my parents that I be put into remedial classes. This idea was something that both of my parents were very shocked over because of my performance(s) they witnessed at home. But since I was my parents' first child,

they figured that my teacher knew best. During school, I was taken out of my classroom and placed in another room with other students for math and reading. *I was very confused about why I was always being taken out of class. I felt that I was a good student. What set me apart from the other kids?* Each day that I was taken out of class, I could feel my self-esteem being depleted from my body. I actually began to believe there was something wrong with me.

While my parents continued to build me up, and told me I was smart and worthy of being in that school environment, being there would always bring me back to where I was originally. I didn't know how to cope with these emotions, and they manifested themselves with me acting out. When my parents realized the negative results class removal had on my development, they took me out of the program and I began to flourish academically. It was from then on, that I promised myself that I would never be "that kid" again. I can honestly say that I held to my promise and, despite all the strife that I received from "being smart," I'm glad that was one promise that I kept.

I slowly began to discover the joy of writing amidst my lapse in confidence as a student. Writing provided me with a platform and the space to talk about my deep feelings. Finally, I was able to put into words the copious thoughts that floated in my head. In response to a particular assignment with no restrictions, I wrote a poem entitled, "What Happens when you Perish?" It was about death and what happens to the spirit after it leaves this plane of existence. It was eye-opening when I received a plethora of recognition not only from my teacher but also my family members. It was a new awareness; something that I had not felt previously. For the first time in my life I felt a surge of power in which art could actually affect people or empower others to see things from a different perspectives than their own. I can't tell you how many times I would go to my grandma's house and be praised for my writing. Although I was only nine years old when

I wrote that poem, it was a seminal moment that showed me the positivity that art can bring to people who are open to it.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, my mom had sent the poem to my grandma and she had submitted it to be in the local paper. I remember going to her house (which was not my favorite thing to do, to go to my dad's mother's place), and she showed me the newspaper. Sure enough, there was my poem in print! The feeling of seeing something that I created was worthy enough for someone to print in the newspaper was an indescribable feeling. *How did I manage to do this? It doesn't make any sense, but who cares! I'm proud of you, Cam!*

Like any other nine-year-old who had reached the zenith of success by being in the newspaper, I had to share. I remember telling all of my friends that I was in the newspaper. I could not have foreseen how pivotal a moment creating that poem would be. It made me feel like I was special – that I had a voice that needed to be heard.

I continued writing. I wrote a lot. In fact, it was a significant lot. It was as if I was trying to catch the whale again. I was searching for my White Whale of poetry. I yearned for that feeling again but, unfortunately, it backfired on me. In one of my stories that I created, I described my grandma's house (on my Mom's side) as that "loud house." *Now, looking back on this, I wish I had a better vocabulary at that time to describe what it was actually like on Sundays at my grandma's house.* My grandma's house was a place of complete chaos, but it was a good chaos. Her home was one of those places that I learned things that I wasn't prepared to learn but my favorite memories from childhood were compiled and treasured.

Give me a break – I was nine! When I go back home – to this day, nearly 20 years later – the "loud house" description is always mentioned.

My mom was one of ten children. It wasn't until later in my life that I realized a family of 10 was not normal. Nevertheless, my grandma, Louise Seals, fostered a place that gave me my deepest laughs as well as tears. *There is a closet in that house that I will not go near because I am still scarred from what my cousins did to me. I couldn't stand them!*

Grandma Seals' house was the first place that I felt somewhat safe to be who I was. Each of us was respected as a different person, yet we all spoke the same language. Grandma was the thread that held us all together. We were so close that nothing could tear us apart. It gave us license to poke fun of each other ruthlessly.

Whatever was a person's most embarrassing moment in that house, the family held on to it so tightly, like a hug from one of my favorite aunties, Tee Bettye. *Tee Bettye gave authentic hugs, the ones where you are on the cusp of not being able to breathe. As y'all rock in unison side to side, ain't nothing like a genuine Black Hug. It's like being enveloped in a big quilt with a nice weight to it – on a sick or rainy day – where one is neither too hot nor too cold. It's comfort and security all wrapped into one.*

My family never forgets. When I die they will be laughing over my body about all the embarrassing things I did while I was a kid. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Life wasn't always fun and games for some of our family. No matter the time, we were always at risk of getting a whooping. It didn't matter if we were the son or daughter of the whooper, we were all fair game. The only person we didn't want to annoy was my Uncle Butch. I was terrified of that man. He had an Iron Belt (not literally), but I often pictured it would feel like it! From the horror stories told by my cousins, I knew it was something I never wanted to experience. I was close to being whooped multiple times, but I had a quick enough tongue to get out of it. Thankfully, I was never on the other end; but I found it ironic that I liked witnessing it.

It was the best entertainment a kid could ever ask for. We would never actually see it, but hearing it was good enough!

Taking all of these happenings into account as a nine-year-old, I was writing a story based on my family where I struggled to find the best way to describe what my grandma's house sounded like, so I called it the "Loud House." Despite me not knowing that it would be something that would follow me for the rest of my life – within the lore of the Seals residence – I was accurate in my description. If those faux wood paneled walls could speak, anyone would understand the beauty of why I hold her and my times there special to my heart.

As sensitive as I was at that age, I could not discern if they liked the story or was it something that was just a joke. I felt humiliated by the jokes, but I never stopped writing. It was just something that I kept to myself as well as the teachers for whom I was fulfilling the assignments. It was like one of those moments I felt like I was robbed. In my writing, I felt safe to talk about the things that I was dealing with internally yet the opportunity to speak was taken away. I really shut that part of myself off verbally and went back to my books – a place where I always felt safe. My intelligence was something that no one could ever take away from me.

My premonition of middle school appeared as if it would be the worst time for me – I might lose my footing as a creative writer. Expecting that I would be in a lot of classes with people I had not met before, I thought it would grant me the opportunity to define who I wanted to be as a person. However, none of this actually happened. In middle school, I was just a smart kid who hung around a lot of the white kids who had similar interests. I was completely oblivious to the fact that the people I was associated with could be a detriment to how I was seen by my peers. I had the unwitting privilege of learning this lesson while playing football.

There is no better time than now to start talking about my dad. It seems that in everything I did as a child, I would always be compared to my father. “You look jus’ like yo’ daddy!” “Look at this boy! He looks just like Brother!” *These statements were uttered as if it was impossible for a child and his father to look alike. We were the first to do it.*

From our looks to the way that we talked and walked, I resembled my father, Eddie Gray. As the first born, it was hard for me not to want to resemble every facet of my dad. He was my first understanding of being a man. In turn, I wanted to make sure that I was a reflection of dad to my little brother. Each opportunity I got, I wanted to prove to dad that I could be the person who he would be proud to call his son. My father was the one who directed me in creating a palette in sports, music, the way I dressed ... and damn near everything! He was everything to me.

There was that question ... whether or not I was going to play football. For me, it was not even a question. I had to live up to my dad’s legacy. I didn’t feel like I had a choice. It was something that a young man just did. He did it for his father, and I would do it for mine.

Dad often showed me multiple highlights of himself as a running back at Fairfield High School. It was incredible to witness what my eyes saw. Dad was cutting in and out with speed I had no idea he possessed. I could not honestly see myself doing the same. When hearing my dad talk about those times with his childhood friend who had most of the tapes, I began to imagine myself doing the same with my soon-to-be friends. I truly wanted to be able to look back with fondness with fellow teammates on the “good times” we had while playing.

I’m proud to say that it actually happened. So, it worked, I guess... The look on dad’s face was one of light. When he said, “Look Cam! You see that?” I would simply nod and dream about it being me. I didn’t know it then, but that wasn’t the man that he wanted me to be. He wanted me to be *MORE*.

The difference between my dad's experience growing up and my own was that he lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood. There wasn't a lot about my experiences that he could have fathomed. To me, my father was also one of those people whom everybody wanted to be around. He was charming, good looking, and athletic. *What more do you need to survive in middle school and high school?*

I felt awkward talking to my dad about what I was dealing with at school because I thought he wouldn't understand. I was also fearful that he would give me that stereotypical stoic response of "Be a Man!" or "Quit Crying!" My perfect solution was to just take it. No matter how derogatory or somewhat violent the offenses toward me might be, I would just "eat" them. There were moments in which I would just go into the bathroom and just cry. I had a hard time understanding my feelings. *Why me? What did I do to deserve this? All I am here to do is do my best in school and, yet, this is the type of treatment I received?*

I honestly recall there were few, if any, weeks that went by without hearing some type of comment about my appearance, or that I wasn't black enough. Not having the wherewithal to combat this abuse, besides my dad telling me, "So what? It was just words; you can't allow that to affect you. Don't you EVER let them put their hands on you though! You NEVER throw the first punch, but you END IT!" I was lost. I felt worthless. I stopped believing in myself and began to internalize all of the things that were being said to me. I had no idea who I was. I started to just adapt into the idea of what "blackness" meant to my peers ... losing any inkling of the true definition and becoming a walking stereotype.

I was familiar with football because of my father's background as well as playing it at home with friends. I saw football as my opportunity to show my dad who I was and that I could be a football player. When I was in sixth grade we had spring training. I had no idea what to

expect or how much it would change the way that I saw myself and my being. I had no idea how brutal the sport was. I thought that when I practiced, it was going to be something where I really wouldn't hit anyone. I assumed we would practice form and then go full contact at the games. I was sorely mistaken.

I had played tackle football at home with the neighborhood kids, so I wasn't afraid of the contact. I didn't expect how things would change when pads and helmets were introduced. I learned very quickly what it meant. The first true hit that I had was in the Oklahoma drill. The only way I could describe what it was like is this: "You are basically running into a wall at full speed and, for a split second, you think you could bust through, only to be thrown back and land directly on your head.

The coaches would slap the other person's helmet, commending him on the tackle while I laid there physically in the worst pain that I had ever felt previously. Not understanding the environment that I was being indoctrinated into, my eyes began to swell. The coach proceeded to pull me up by my shoulder pads, which I didn't know was humanly possible, and forced me to run laps because I was tackled and fell.

After lap three, I knew I had to change myself in order to survive within this sport. I had to change the way I dealt with my emotions, and keep myself in check to push through the pain. That's exactly what I did. Just as I did off the field, I would continue to push through the pain. No matter how bad it hurt, I tried to convince myself that it was temporary. I entered into this mental zone within myself, where I stopped caring about my own well-being when I got on the field. Nothing mattered. I would run as hard as I could and hurl my body into the person in front of me. It allowed me, within reason, to cope with a lot of the abuse that was taking place outside of school. It was an outlet.

Though I never made it beyond scout team in middle school, I became very dependent on the sport as a place that I used for therapy. I always gave it my hardest at each practice. I was truly unafraid to go up against anybody big or tall.

Coach Barthel was the one who saw the resilience within me. I do not understand why, but he had a soft spot with me. I felt like he saw me as one of his sons. I felt that someone, other than my family, actually saw me for who I was. Since I wasn't the biggest player he would always make time for me. He made me feel like I was worth something. I remember the last day of football in eighth grade when he designed a play for me to catch the ball so I could end my career in middle school with a touchdown. *It didn't work out because the damn quarterback overthrew it, but it was the thought that counted.* It was truly special that he would allow a kid like me an opportunity. My coach helped me understand the power of showing someone that you care for them, how it can really change their whole demeanor and outlook on themselves.

Very similar to middle school, I really thought that football was another opportunity for me to reinvent myself and begin another chapter within my life and not as a person who got pushed around. I would not have to look for the approval from the others to determine my own identity.

Like clockwork, I fell right back into that same spot as a person whom people would crack jokes on or physically slap because they knew that I would never fight back, and they could get away with it. *It never made sense to me.*

Vying for others' attention and approval, I would continue to mold my persona into what others thought was funny and became somewhat disruptive in class. It wasn't until Mr. Rutsky's Creative Writing class did my life completely change.

The way that the class was set up was that before you could join the actual upper level course, you had to go through a preliminary course where Mr. Rutsky would present different genres of writing styles from nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and playwriting. He gave each student an opportunity to try and see if we wanted to stay with a particular style if given the opportunity to move on the next year.

There were a lot of upperclassmen in that course, and I admired them. I would do anything to make them laugh. Most times I would not take the assignments seriously. I would say to myself, *What would make them laugh? What can I bring to class that would stir the pot?* As much as I loved writing and wanted to improve my style, my peers' acceptance was worth more to me than my own progress.

At the end of the year, Mr. Rutsky pulled me aside and confronted me about my behavior. I was confused by his apprehension about inviting me to be in his class next year. I tried to explain that I was invested in improving my writing and wanted to push myself. He asked, "Where was that student in the past year?"

I had no answers for him.

I was embarrassed because he was right. Due to my fears, I showcased only a handful of times what I could actually bring to the table. I promised Mr. Rutsky that day that if I were added to his class, I would give him my all and more. His reluctant signature on my course sheet was the best thing that happened to me. I changed.

The last two years of high school were probably the most transformative aspects of my education career. The day Mr. Rutsky brought me out into the hallway, he gave me license not only to be myself but also that it was okay to be me. I finally felt that I was a part of something that felt like family. While in other classes, I felt that I was not being seen or heard by others in

the classroom. Yet Mr. Rutsky treated us like adults and we could write about whatever we wanted to write about. His class was a safe space for people regardless of gender or sexual orientation. This experience opened my eyes to explore topics and people I would not have met if it wasn't for that course. I was finally surrounded by people who spoke the same language as me and had similar experiences. Once again, I experienced the freedom to be myself not only in the classroom but also in other locations. I realized that the more I was open in my writing about the person I was, the more others would open up to me.

I found myself hanging out and being friends with people I would not have associated with previously. For the first time I had confidence in myself and felt happy to be ME for as long as I could remember. I became optimistic about what life had in store for me. I had few, if any notions about what college would offer, but I was excited to face new challenges.

I entered my freshman year as a graphic designer. I did not understand what this meant at that time, but I saw it as a way for me to achieve a lifelong dream to work for Pixar. Bringing the same awe-inspiring moment in the movie theater to others that I experienced as a child when I saw Toy Story was my goal. *I was way in over my head! Was I?*

My first week in the Art Department challenged me in ways I had not been challenged previously. As a person whose only art experience was drawing in the margins of tests or notes, the first semester was like trying to speak a language I had not spoken before and then being asked to teach it to someone else. Unlike the times before where my inadequacies were being thrust upon me by my peers, this experience was tangible. There would be moments when I wanted to quit because I faced challenges that were totally new and in ways I had not

experienced beforehand. I kept hearing my dad's voice reminding me I should give it my all no matter what I did like a record stuck on repeat.

I became the student who would stay later than most students and ask lots of questions. I did not feel ashamed to ask for help from other students. I am very thankful for my friends that I had at the time because they never minded spending the time to teach me the concepts. It was a nice feeling to be around people who liked me for me, and not what I could provide or to be the butt of their jokes. Others actually cared and wanted to see me succeed in each project and improve as an artist.

One teacher who everyone feared yet also respected all at once was Bill Dunlop. He was one of those professors who really didn't give a shit and would [figuratively] rip you into pieces if he felt like you were bullshitting him. There were multiple times that students would leave in tears because Professor Dunlop was so harsh on them during critiques. In hindsight, a lot of what he was saying was not far from the truth. His course was one of those that if you survived, you semi-earned his respect which was a toll in itself.

After each critique, Professor Dunlop would select a few of the projects out of the two studios he taught to post on the wall. If yours was one of the pieces on the wall, it was basically like you had just received a Golden Ticket to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. I'm sure most of my friends can attest that was one of the highlights of their college career.

All that being said, when I walked into class on a Monday after our critique on Friday, and I saw my design on the wall, I was ecstatic! It seemed unbelievable for someone to have that much faith in something that I had created. It gave me a euphoric boost of confidence in my art, one that I had not experienced. It reminded me to have faith in myself despite the negative

thoughts that would invade my head. It was something that made me refocus on self—that I had the power to conquer anything.

At the conclusion of our freshman year, each of us waited to receive a piece of mail that would let us know whether or not we were accepted into the graphic design program. I waited anxiously for the mail to come to see if I had made it, but my letter never came. *I'm not gonna lie. I was a little hurt by it. The number of hours that I spent that year felt like it was all for nothing.*

Through my disappointment, I remembered the conversation that I had with some upperclassmen who were already in the program. They described it as a “cookie cutter” type of program. There was not much freedom to be able to formulate your own ideas. I knew that that was something I didn’t want within a program. The next semester I changed my major to art.

I was excited and stoked to embrace this new interest in my life with all of my ability. I had little notion about what concentration I would find myself gravitating toward, but I was open to the experience. In the fall, I had signed up for painting. It was one of those mediums that I enjoyed because it reminded me of charcoal. The way that I was able to smudge the oil paint and create beautiful color transitions—I was hooked!

In addition, around this time my painting professor started introducing me to a great number of artists of color because most of my work pertained to issues of race. He introduced me to several artists, such as Michael Ray Charles, Kara Walker, and Kerry James Marshall. They were like Gods to me and I aspired to be like them. I wanted to create works that felt as monumental as their pieces were to me.

There are moments in our lives that set us on a path of discovery within ourselves and the world around us that we could not perceive at the time they occur. My enlightenment just so happened to occur at the main stairwell of the Art Building.

I was beginning to walk upstairs to the painting studio when I was struck. I noticed several black ink prints in a vertical portfolio, and I could not tell what medium created them. I was astounded by their boldness, yet they were also very delicate because of the line weight. Joseph Velasquez walked up to me, and I believe he could see the “coming-to-God” moment in my eyes. He explained the process to me, and I was hooked. In that moment, I knew what medium I wanted to concentrate my studies. I signed up for his class in the spring and I was like a sponge to water.

No one could take me out of that studio. I lived and breathed printmaking. It was the first medium that made sense to me. It was comforting because it brought forth issues I wanted to express through my art—a boldness I felt other mediums lacked. The prints I made shrieked/bellowed/yelled about the Black Experience—a direct reflection of my feelings since the beginning of my life. I felt much joy to finally find myself within my work. Previously I wanted to yell about my frustrations, but I didn’t feel that I had the power to do so. It was the first time that I felt empowered as a proud black man and was able to talk about the issues and traumas that had plagued me in my past. For the first time in my life I had the tools to fight the demons that I had been dealing with since I was a kid.

As I was having this epiphany of beginning to find my truth within my work, I began to envision a road to success and the power that emerged through it. I started to be asked with open arms to take part in exhibitions, juried shows, and the printmaking community. People were not putting my work into shows because they had a quota to fill; they actually understood what I was

trying to express in my work and genuinely wanted to support it. As I received acceptance letters, I often found myself in complete awe—even though my art was being recognized, I still sought to have confidence in my own self.

As I embarked on my journey in printmaking, I still allowed myself to explore other courses offered in the department. I figured if I had the opportunity to learn a new medium that I could add to my repertoire, why not?

I found myself falling in love with other mediums (video, audio, sculpture, etc.) which are seen in my current work. The more that I kept exploring art, the more I came to understand my career would be fulfilled primarily as an artist rather than solely a printmaker. Although printmaking is my first love, sometimes an artist's best work cannot be created in one particular medium. Exploring other mediums enabled me to see and experiment with the notion of being interdisciplinary and coming to my own understanding of my own growth. I also started to envision the beauty in my ideas and their manifestation in a variety of art forms.

My mentor, Joseph, left Auburn prior to my senior year, but we stayed in touch. I had just completed my last year of college and was mere months away from graduation. I literally had no clue as to where I wanted to go but I did know that I wanted my next adventure to have something to do with printmaking.

Joseph was a part of a collective of printmakers called the Outlaw Printmakers. During his tenure at Auburn, his studio was covered in prints by all of them. I was taken aback by the different styles and the way the artists approached their work with a sense of “punch you in the face” type of ferocity. I was completely envious of their ability to express such passion, and I would have done anything to have the possibility to work with them. I reached out to one

printmaker and he respectfully declined because he worked alone and didn't have space for anyone in his shop. He told me that he knew that Tom Huck was looking for somebody. My ears perked up like a dog hearing its name called.

Despite this fortuitous lead, I was quite hesitant (actually scared) about contacting Tom because his work was like nothing I had ever seen beforehand. His art was fast, hard, metal, hardcore, and gorgeous all at the same time. I remember the first time that I viewed some of his prints, I found myself unable to believe they were actually prints. I mean, some of his cuts were so small and delicate that a person could not register them without a magnifying glass. Understanding how much I respected him, my insecurities swelled up again and I honestly believed that there was no way in hell I could work at a place like that. Then I was reminded that you miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take (my dad's wisdom poking at me). I took a deep breath and sent an email inquiring about working there.

Every day I checked my emails frantically, hoping to find something to give me an inclination that they had at least received the email. Yet every day there was no response—nothing. I was honestly waiting for a “no” so that I could stop getting my hopes up. Then, sure enough...

The day before graduation, I received a phone call saying Evil Prints wanted to know if I could come up and see if I wanted to work there. It was sealed – I was going to Saint Louis! I moved there in February of 2014, but I was not prepared for what lurked ahead. When I first arrived, I found I was not doing very much printing. I was mainly cutting paper and preparing it for more experienced staff to complete the printing. Luckily, when we (new crewmembers) weren't doing prep work, we got the opportunity to produce our own work. During those times, I got to know the human being I was working for quite well.

Before working at the studio, I had only seen “The OP version” of Tom Huck. Tom appeared to be extremely intimidating and looked like he would punch a hole in your head if you brought him to such a frenzy. However, when we had time to talk, I found that my perception was far from the truth. He was actually a sweet man just trying to keep his dreams afloat with carving tools in his hand. Although we were born in different eras, I felt that Tom got me. When I talked to him about my aspirations, he wouldn’t dust off my words. He gave me game about how the system worked. On plenty occasions he ragged on me for asking questions that he had already answered, but would repeat his answers anyways. My heart swelled from deep inside each time I heard the guy I had looked up to for years acknowledge the potential he saw in me and what I could do.

Although I worked at a place that would allow me to become the best printmaker possible, other aspects of my life were rough. I was barely making it financially from month to month. It was very hard, and I came to understand I was not the only member of the crew who felt this way. The good part was I never felt that I was alone. The shop was our haven. It was a place where we worked closely with one another – the beacon that kept us sane. I should also mention there was a bar next door which lurked as a danger to each of us. We lived, breathed, ate, and drank printmaking. We didn’t want to leave the studio in fear of missing something.

I had been at Evil Prints for about two years when I started to produce art that seemed to me like it was going in a direction that I wanted. One night after I had finished a long print session of new prints, Huck had called me over to his space. We both extended our cordial greetings and began to talk about the prints that I pulled the previous night. He asked me questions about the work and the motivations that inspired me. I explained them all to him.

Then he replied that, from the works that I was creating, it seemed like I had kept my boxing gloves on: “When you are making work, you should take the gloves off and never be afraid to hit as hard as you can. Who are you trying to protect? If you are going to go there, then there is no need to go only halfway. It’s okay to be angry and to make people mad. They made you mad, didn’t they? Then you have every right to reciprocate that anger and frustration.”

It was conversations like these that gave me the agency to begin to be more upfront in the way that I talked about my work and how I saw my own work within the lexicon of art history. Over the three years that I spent in Saint Louis, I was blessed with a lot of opportunities to bring my work to the masses within the community, as well as to see the impact and respect of not only people who I was familiar with in the state, but also those outside. It was a profound experience. The majority of these happenings occurred in predominantly white spaces. I needed to understand how my art was manifesting itself within the culture of a people who had some semblance of the black experience because of Michael Brown and other shootings that took place in 2016. I didn’t understand the power of my platform and what it meant to the people until my solo exhibition – *Blacks Only*.

Blacks Only was a show that was a culmination of mainly new work from the past couple of months. I knew that I wanted this show to be different than any other show that I had done at that time. I wanted to create a new experience for the people who walked through the gallery – one that would evoke the black experience coming from a mouth that lived it!

I had created works for the show that took people on a journey to explore my own experience as a Black man. I engaged people immediately by having separate entrances where each viewer would enter into the space. The Black entrance led people directly into the main gallery of the show, while the white entrance led guests through the actual building itself –

winding through corridors that were riddled with work as they found their way to the gallery space. Many of the works that were on display during their journey dealt with the notion of them coming face to face with their transgressions and the part they played to create White Supremacy in America. I had actually started to consider the thought of how a space can change one's perception of not only how they viewed the work but also how they viewed themselves afterward.

Positioned in front of one of my triptychs of prints, I placed a sculpture of a Black body covered completely in white cloth. There were three pooled blood stains that came up out of the fabric, as if the body was just murdered there, right in the gallery space. Not only did this sculpture limit the number of people who were able to see the triptych up close, but it also once again reiterated the fact that you have to be aware of your surroundings. Unlike during a news cycle, this was a Black body each viewer could not simply overlook.

Once again, this work forced each viewer to see the transgressions and product of white supremacy directly and unapologetically in their face. There wasn't any place they could hide! Instead of me doing most of the heavy lifting pertaining to my work as didactic, I literally shoved it down the viewers' throats. The entire show was designed to represent my experience, and I gave the viewers the opportunity to come up with their own conclusion via their journey. This was the precipice of my understanding of the power of installation and its connection to how the work is read.

Eventually I began to realize I had reached my tenure at Evil Prints. It was time for me to think about taking the next step to advance my career. I knew that it would be to attend grad school. Just as that thought had crossed my mind, I was introduced to April Katz at a printmaking conference during an open portfolio session a couple months prior to reaching this

crossroad. April asked me if I wanted to come to Iowa State University for a visit. During my visit, I was a little apprehensive because I had not previously been in a city that had a monoculture such as Ames. After long talks with the faculty about my reservations, they reassured me that they would always have my best interest in heart and help me develop my work to the best of their ability. I was still very hesitant about whether Iowa State was the right school for me when I left, but I had six hours to think about it. As I considered the opportunities that could arise from attending graduate school, I realized it was an opportunity that I needed to see through to completion.

During my time in graduate school, I had a plethora of experiences that truly informed how I wanted my work to be experienced and perceived by the general public. I started to notice a change in the way I was looking at my work – when it stopped being about a common Black experience but became more about MY Black experience. Understanding where I wanted to take my work highly informed a lot of the decisions that I would make in the shows I had during my tenure at Iowa State.

The Negro from The South was the first of many firsts for me. It was not only my first show in Ames, but also the first time I brought my own lineage to the historical nature of Black oppression into my personal work. The works in the gallery were all voids. Some were created organically, and others were silhouettes of lynched bodies and objects of violence.

Etched into the voids were body parts of family members. There was a shift of body parts coming in and out of focus to provoke the thought of the Black body wanting to be seen but, inherently, always being shoved back into the background. How are we acknowledged only when it is beneficial to the people in power?

My show in itself was a huge task because I had a short timeframe to not only put on the show, but also create the works as well. It was extremely important for me to focus on what made *Blacks Only* so special.

By making connections to each work throughout the show, I led the viewers throughout the space. At the base of each piece, I had preserved the residue of the work as it was being made; the work was something that was alive or breathing, making a direct connection to my body as creator, and also the bodies being depicted within the voids. In the back of the gallery there was a long hallway that I made even smaller with the canvas pieces. Due to the distance, only one or two people could go into the space at the same time, thus making it sacred. The depictions on the canvases were that of myself (eyes and teeth); and on the farthest back wall, similar to the voids up front, was a combination of my mother's and father's facial features. This triptych directly correlates to the religious symbolism of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This show was extremely pivotal because I had not previously made work like this show. It was the first time I allowed the patrons to peer into me and my own story. *The Negro from The South* exhibition enabled me to see that the impact that the interjection of my personal life can give the viewer a better understanding of my thoughts.

As I continued along this path inward, I began to ponder different opportunities in which I could bring the viewer into my space as well as bring my space to the viewer. This inclined me to create an ongoing experience wherein I made the gallery itself my own space. The show entitled, *My Refuge*, questions the idea of space and what it means to take up space. In the performance, I lived in the gallery for a week and, depending on the time or day people were in the space, they might have viewed me sleeping or watching a movie. This show allowed the viewers a direct look at my sacred space and the opportunity to invade or respect it. When I was

not in the space, I left everything just as it was and made sure I didn't clean up anything so that there would always be some residue of my body within the space at all times. A video was also playing of me filming myself in my actual room, as well as other clips of violence toward Black men in the process of being edited. In the video, I also talked about what the space and my room represented to me and how it helped me maintain my own mental health.

Whenever I was not in class, I required myself to return to that space to continue to question the notion of what is public and private. The space was open to the public but, for the time I was there, I was inhabiting it and treating it as a private dwelling. With this installation and video work I took a step further to, once again, allow the viewer to gain a better understanding of not only who I was as an artist but also as a person.

While entering the summer semester, I knew exactly where my work was going and the avenues I was going to take. I was still not sure what form my work would be in this time but, instead of stressing about it, I allowed myself to just be. I started to free my mind and allow the work to come to me in whatever form it saw fit. I began to think more about my own story and my never-ending chase into the definition of Blackness while always trying to grasp it. I can recall how each time that I was so close to mastering or getting it, it would always prove more elusive. Most of these ideas are linked to a series of my performances in my studio space and outdoors, reveling in the beauty of my black skin and my body and my interaction with nature. These ideas gave birth to my next show, *Black Immersion*.

The show was comprised of a series of photographs, stills and videos, each depicting the physical and metaphorical intervention of the Black body and Blackness in the world. This show further reaffirmed the importance of my story through my works. My story, pain, and identity struggle were not only worth talking about, but also presented that part of me to the masses. The

show brought to my attention the beauty of being vulnerable. Leading up to the show I had always perceived that that was something I should always keep to myself and that no one would be interested in it. The show delivered me from my own perceptions of what Blackness truly represented to me and spawned new questions that I put myself up to the task to answer.

This is the part where I end this, but I don't know how. Writing this thesis was more difficult than I imagined it would be. Through each story I found myself reliving those moments in my life once again – the pain and the suffering.

As I am writing this last portion of text to close this up, I am very proud of myself for getting through it. For so much of my life, I have been told to bottle up my emotions and to never share this part of me. I was told that my story was not something that needed to be heard. I would be seen as weak or a disappointment; nevertheless, I feel none of those things. I feel free and strong because I never folded. I kept going. I have the power as an individual to dictate my own fate. Since the beginning I allowed others to place labels on me and define who I was as an individual, yet no one has the right to do this except me, myself!

There is no one definition of Blackness! We are all Kings and Queens from different backgrounds and interests. It is what makes us beautiful. Through all of the ways we have been beaten and broken, we still stand. It's in our genes. We live in a world that wants to strike us down, yet we continue to stand. Be proud of who you are and don't be afraid to embrace every part of you because that is where the power lies!

I could not say this then, but ...

I am Black!

I am Proud!

I am ME!



Figure 1. Diggin' (still from digital video, 5 min. 02 sec.)

Note: Diggin' is a play on words. One is literally watching the artist take material out of a mound and deposit it off camera, but it also represents the figurative notion of "digging." The artist is digging within himself in hopes to find himself, but also in black culture to gain acceptance and find out where he exists in that realm as well.



Figure 2. Untitled (still from digital video, 6 min. 43 sec.)

Note: Untitled depicts the artist depositing the black material he was shoveling in Figure 1 on to the white snow. Capturing this action on white snow places emphasis on the beauty of the black soil. The video proceeds to swell, almost dwarfing the white snow underneath it. The mound expresses the strength and dominance of blackness that directly relates to the artist's relationship to his identity.



Figure 3. Too Heavy (still from digital video, 44 sec.)

Note: This video depicts the artist dragging a burlap sack on snow. Too Heavy illustrates the weight, which Blackness holds. Though it is something that most people would aspire to have, there is more to the experience than just box braids. The bag represents the pain, which each Black individual has to carry with them as they enter the context of American Society.



Figure 4. Harvesting (still from digital video, 13 min. 21 sec.)

Note: Harvesting depicts the artist in the labor-intensive act of trying to scoop up the material that he removed from the mound in Fig. 1. It is a direct representation of the artist trying to soak up as much Blackness within himself, in hopes to gain more clarity of his own being. His hands are exposed on a cold afternoon. He tries to breathe on his hands, hopefully to gain some comfort, but none is found. This work is truly indicative of the struggle and work it requires for one to find their own identity.



Figure 5. My Body is my Body as my Body is Wood (still from video, 01 min. 16 sec.)

Note: Acceptance. The artist is now one with himself. In the video, the artist has taken a wooden piece that has been sculpted by a CNC router of his body. In the work, he is rubbing his body, producing a sheen to show the beauty of not only the wood, but of his own body as well. He is depicting the love that he has for himself, his body, and his Blackness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baraka, Imamu Amiri. (1971). *Raise, race, rays, raze: Essays since 1965 by Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Random House.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. (2007). *The souls of black folk*. New York, NY: W.E.B. Du Bois.
- Fanon, Frantz. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (1st ed), (translated from the French by Richard Philcox) New York, NY: Grove (Distributed by Group West).
- Fredrickson, George. M., and American Council of Learned Societies. (1971). *The black image in the white mind: The debate on Afro-American character and destiny, 1817-1914* New York: Harper & Row (ACLS Humanities E-Book).
- Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. (2010). *The interpretation of dreams, Sigmund Freud* (translated from German and edited by James Strachey. New York, NY: Basic.
- Gammel, Irene. (2002). *Baroness Elsa, gender, dada, and everyday modernity: A cultural biography* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hooks, Bell. (2004). *We real cool: Black men and masculinity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jackson, Ronald L., and Mark C. Hopson (2011). Masculinity in the black imagination: Politics of communicating race and manhood. *Black Studies & Critical Thinking, Vol. 16*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Johnson, Charles, and John McCluskey, Eds. (1997). *Black men speaking*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. (2003). *Appropriating blackness: Performance and the politics of authenticity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Katznelson, Ira., and Institute of Race Relations. (1973). *Black men, white cities: Race, politics, and migration in the United States, 1900-30 and Britain, 1948-68*. London, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- King, Martin Luther. (1964). *Why we can't wait* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Lecky, Robert. S., and Elliot Wright, Eds. (1969). *Black manifesto: Religion, racism, and reparations*. New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, A Search Book.
- Ligon, Glenn, Scott Rothkopf, and Whitney Museum of American Art. (2011). *Yourself in the world: Selected writings and interviews, Glenn Ligon*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lincoln, C. Eric. (1964). *My face is black*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- Litwack, Leon F. (2009). *How Free Is Free? The long death of Jim Crow*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Nathan I. Huggins Lectures.
- Meyer, Stephen Grant. (2000). *As long as they don't move next door: Segregation and racial conflict in American neighborhoods*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Moten, Fred. (2003). *In the break: The aesthetics of the black radical tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Moten, Fred. (2017). *and blur: Consent not to be a single being*, Vol. 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Pendleton, Adam, and Haunch of Venison. (2009). *Adam Pendleton: EL T D K*. Berlin, Germany: Haunch of Venison.
- Pendleton, Adam, and Jenny Schlenzka. (2017). *Black dada reader*. Adam Pendleton. London: Koenigh Books Ltd.
- Rajiv, Sudhi. (1992). *Forms of black consciousness* (1st American ed.). New York, NY: Advent.
- Van Der Slik, Jack R., Ed. (1970). *Black conflict with white America: A reader in social and political analysis*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Political Science Series.

Note: These books are not referenced in my thesis. Nevertheless, they were influential to me during the writing process.